

**Contexts and perspectives**

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Izaak Walton, who published a biography of John Donne in 1640, claimed that this poem is addressed to Donne's wife, written when he was leaving for a voyage to the continent in 1611. You have to bear in mind that at the time travel anywhere, and especially overseas, was a difficult and dangerous enterprise, quite likely to involve acts of mugging, piracy and imprisonment for espionage. In that light, it seems perfectly natural that his wife might be a bit upset about his trip.

**Summary**

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Sweetest love, I'm not going because I'm tired of you, nor in the hope that I'll find a better love out there, but since I will eventually die, it's best to amuse myself by dying feigned deaths.

Last night the sun went down and yet he's here again today. He's got no desire or feeling, nor half as short a life, so don't worry about me, but please believe I'll make quicker journeys because I've got more incentives than him.

Oh how feeble man's power is, that if good luck happens he can't add another hour or recall a lost one. But when bad luck comes, we strengthen it, lengthen it and beautify it, so that it marches over us.

When you sigh, you don't sigh air, you sigh my soul away; when you weep, both kind and cruel, my life's blood decays. It can't be true that you love me, like you say, if you, who is the better of me, lay waste my life in yours.

Don't let your prophetic heart foresee me ill in case destiny takes your place and fulfils your fears; instead think of us as merely turned aside to sleep. Those who keep one another's memory alive are never parted.

## John Donne

### Song 'Sweetest love I do not go'

#### Explanations

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Make sure you are clear about the meanings of these words in the poem, using close analysis of the word in the context of its line, the glossary in your edition of the poems (if available), dictionaries, and perhaps an encyclopaedia.

Line	Word/phrase	Explanation
7	in jest	
8	feign'd	
9	yesternight	
9	hence	
11	sense	
25–28	When thou sigh'st ... When thou weep'st ...	
27	unkindly kind	
33	divining	
34	forethink	

Line	Word/phrase	Explanation
7	in jest	for amusement
8	feign'd	pretended
9	yesternight	last night
9	hence	from here
11	sense	feeling
25–28	When thou sigh'st ... When thou weep'st ...	sighs and tears were believed to shorten life
27	unkindly kind	her kindness (her loving sadness at his departure) is unkind (because it hurts him)
33	divining	prophetic
34	forethink	think beforehand

**Themes and issues, attitudes and values**

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1. In this poem, a loving relationship is seen within the contexts of death, time, fortune, wasting away, and fear. Yet all of this is dismissed in the final four lines. These could be interpreted as an assertion of love's power over life's adversity; they could be interpreted as an assertion of the mind's power over reality. To what extent do you agree with each of these views?
2. What do the opening four lines suggest about the lover's attitude to the speaker? How does this shape your attitude to the speaker?
3. We see in this poem the male figure, empowered with "wings and spurs", venturing out into the real world beyond the microcosm created by his love. He tells his lover not to worry; he'll be fine as long as they hold each other in mind. How does this compare with the attitude towards love's microcosm conveyed in 'The Sun Rising'? Does Donne really believe the world of love is better than the world of action?
4. The female figure sighs and weeps, initially suggesting a passive victim stereotype of femininity. She also has a "divining heart", the stereotypical "woman's intuition". However, as we have seen in other poems, this impression is undercut by images of women's power. Where can you find these images in the poem? What effect is created by this tension?

**Language**

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**Stanza 1**

1. The diction of this poem is very simple, often monosyllabic, as you can see in the opening four lines. What impression does this create of the relationship between the speaker and his lover?

**Stanza 2**

1. What image of the speaker is created by the reference to "wings and spurs"?

**Stanza 3**

1. "fear not" in line 13, "believe" in line 4, "let not" in line 33, and "but think" in line 37. These verbs are in the imperative form. What impression does this create of the speaker's personality, his relationship, and of Donne's attitudes to masculinity and femininity?
2. Donne uses f-sound alliteration in lines 17 and 18. What tone does this create? Why is this important at this point in the poem?
3. What does the repetition of "hour" in lines 19 and 20 serve to emphasise?
4. What effect does the syntactic parallelism (parallel sentence structures) in lines 22–23 create?

**Stanza 4**

1. "sigh'st" is repeated 3 times in lines 25–26. There is alliteration of both the s-sound and the w-sound in these lines, and a number of long vowel sounds. What tone is created by these aural effects? Why is this important at this point in the poem?
2. What impression is created of the speaker's attitude to love by the words "soul" and "blood"?

**Stanza 5**

1. What impact does the word "ne'er" have on your understanding of the speaker's attitude to his relationship?

### **Structure**

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1. In this poem, a loving relationship is seen within the contexts of death, time, fortune, wasting away, and fear. How are these perspectives used to structure the poem?

### **Form**

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1. The rhyme scheme of the poem is ababccddc. How does this reflect the movement of thought in each stanza?
2. Many of the lines are heavily end-stopped, emphasising the rhyme. This creates a strong sense of anticipation as the rhyme pattern builds up, and a strong sense of satisfaction when it reaches its conclusion. How does this help to embody the meaning of the poem?
3. Annotate a copy of the poem to show the rhythm. If you think of lines 1 and 2 of each stanza together, and lines 3 and 4 likewise, you will see that the first four lines are trochaic in their metre. What impact does this create?
4. The fifth line has only two beats instead of the usual pattern of 3 or 4. This becomes a turning point in each stanza. In each stanza, how is this used to signal a change of mood, or a change in the direction of the thought? How do these changes relate to the shift from trochaic to iambic metre?
5. What difference does it make to your reading of the poem knowing that this is a song, which may well have been set to music for performance in Donne's time?